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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000652

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FOR MARCHESE

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: SYRIA PROVIDES ORAL "NO" TO REFUGEE DIRECT ACCESS
PROPOSAL; SAYS PROGRESS WITH IRAQ FROZEN BECAUSE OF
DETAINED SYRIAN SOLDIERS

REF: A. DAMASCUS 534

[1](#)B. STATE 64886

[1](#)C. DAMASCUS 541

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In a June 27 meeting with the Syrian DFM's office director Hussam al-Din A'ala, seeking a response to the PRM refugee non-paper proposal to allow direct action on Iraqi refugee cases with links to the coalition, the SARG confirmed what it had already officially informed the International Organization for Migration (IOM): that the SARG would not allow IOM to directly process this type of case but that it could continue with UNHCR referrals. The SARG was generally disappointed at the level of responsiveness to the Iraqi refugee crisis and was particularly shocked by the Iraqi government's inaction, A'ala said. The poor living conditions of Iraqis in Syria were contributing to a rise in crime and would increase the possibility of regional unrest, he said. A'ala said the SARG had decided to stop all cooperation with Iraq until the case of two detained Syrian soldiers held by the Iraqis was resolved. A'ala said a decision had not been made as to whether Syria would attend a refugee working group meeting being hosted by Jordan in July.
End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On June 27, Charge followed up with MFA DFM office director, Hussam al-Din A'ala to get a SARG response to the non-paper presented to the Syrian delegation in Geneva by the USG in April. Charge also used the occasion to provide information on the extent of USG assistance to Iraqi refugees here to underline that the U.S. was not simply focused on cases of Iraqis being persecuted for links to the Coalition forces. (Note: Post used information provided by PRM on USG assistance without identifying by name the NGOs that have recently received aid. End Note.) A'ala thanked the Charge for delivering the information in response to his request in an earlier meeting (ref a), noting that it was useful to know what the USG was doing to help Iraqi refugees in Syria. On USG contributions to UNHCR, A'ala asked whether U.S. funding had been earmarked for Syria, to which we responded in the negative, noting that UNHCR's appeal had been a general one, including for Jordan and Syria. On USG contributions to NGOs, A'ala asked whether we were in contact with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, which the SARG has designated as the primary point of contact for international NGOs seeking to assist Iraqi refugees. The Charge responded that, while the Embassy has its contacts, we are urging all NGOs to be in contact with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.

13. (C) The Charge encouraged the Syrian government to act quickly to permit the flow of aid, noting that it had taken three months to conclude grant agreements between UNHCR and the ministries of Education and Health and that a third agreement with the Ministry of Higher Education had yet to be signed. The Charge also encouraged the SARG to take steps to facilitate the work of international non-governmental organizations seeking to assist Iraqis. A'ala acknowledged that some Syrian ministries and agencies are working slower than others, adding that ministers and agency heads may meet soon on ways to speed up the process.

14. (C) When asked by the Charge if the SARG had an answer to the non-paper presented in Geneva and then delivered again by the Charge in May (ref b), which included a request for authorization for IOM to do expeditious resettlement processing of Iraqis being persecuted for links to the Coalition forces, A'ala responded that the government had decided that such cases should not be handled by IOM. "We would prefer that these interviews be held at the Embassy," he said. He said that we should consider his oral response, the official Syrian response to the U.S. non-paper. The Syrian government differed from the U.S. in its view of those Iraqis who were the most vulnerable, he said. IOM could, however, continue to process refugees referred by UNHCR, A'ala said. The Charge noted that the Embassy was not equipped to handle refugee cases and said that security would just be one of the issues he believed the SARG would share our concerns on.

15. (C) On international support for Iraqis, A'ala said that the SARG was generally disappointed at the level of responsiveness to assisting refugees. In particular, Syria

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was shocked by the way Iraqi officials have handled the crisis, he said. poor living conditions of Iraqis in Syria are contributing to a rise in crime and would increase the possibility of regional unrest. "If these people return to Iraqi and commit terrorist acts there, what can we do?" he asked. The number of Iraqis in Syria continues to increase, with an estimated 1.4 million displaced Iraqis in Syria now, said A'ala, adding that the SARG may be reaching the limit of its capacity.

16. (C) A'ala mentioned that the Jordanians were organizing a refugee working group meeting scheduled for late July but that the SARG had not decided whether to participate. A'ala said the SARG had frozen participation with the Iraqis until two Syrian soldiers detained earlier this year on the Syria-Iraq border (as reported ref c) were released. The soldiers had been stationed on the Syria-Iraq border in line with requests for increased border security, and the reason behind their disappearance remained unclear, A'ala said. Recent reports indicated that the two had been convicted and sentenced to 10 years in jail, and the lack of information in a case involving Syrian citizens was a cause of embarrassment to the Syrian Government that could not be ignored, he said.

17. (C) Comment: The SARG appears willing to maintain a limited dialogue with the U.S. on refugee issues, and A'ala seemed pleased with the information on USG assistance to Iraqi refugees in Syria, noting that other embassies had previously provided similar information about their efforts here. His comments about the Direct Access program indicated the SARG sees the resettlement of Iraqis with USG ties as a political issue that is of more urgency to the USG than to the regime. It was also clear from his comments that the SARG will likely seek to capitalize politically on the Iraqi government's lack of contributions to Iraqi refugees and on the continued detention of the two Syrian soldiers. We will continue to use this channel to press, in close coordination with UNHCR, for more latitude for the UN and NGOs to provide assistance to the growing Iraqi refugee population in Syria. CORBIN